Our fragmentariness as human beings is not only temporal, in that we are bounded by birth and death; it is also spatial, in that we are not ourselves the encompassing whole of reality but mere parts encompassed by it. Indeed, "our world," as we call it, as comprising the other beings to which we are at all adequately related, never coincides with *the* world, the whole of beings as such, but is always a restricted phenomenal field bounded by an external environment. The reason for this is that our having a world at all is grounded not in our openness to possibility as such, but in our being necessarily confined to some specific range of possibilities inherited from our limited past and projected into our limited future. Thus our relatedness to others is itself relative. We do not participate in them fully, as they are in themselves, but are in principle required to encounter them under the perspectives imposed by our own particular projects of self-understanding. Naturally, in our average, everyday existence, we are not fully aware of this spatial limitation of ourselves and our world and, in fact, we hide from ourselves the situational character of the "truth" constituted by our merely fragmentary encounters with others. We treat other things and persons as the mere objects of our own partial appreciations, and so "fall" or succumb to our world by absolutizing its limitations,

Insofar as we exist authentically, however, we acknowledge that the truth or "undisclosedness" in which we stand is always relative, and we hold ourselves open for ever new encounters with the others whose being in themselves in the whole transcends their being for us as objects in our world. Although as human beings, we must continue to exist within our world and may always succumb to a new bondage to it, our authenticity consists in being dialectically free from it, and therefore also free for both ourselves and the other beings that make up the environment beyond us (cf. *The Reality of God*: 154 f.).

We ordinarily understand a human act to be a specific word or deed whereby, through the instrumentality of the body and its various members, the self undertakes to carry out its particular purposes or projects. Thus I may be said to be acting in any attempt by means of the spoken or written word to communicate my understanding of issues that happen to be under discussion in my interactions with others. And yet this ordinary meaning of the words "human act" is certainly not their only or even primary meaning. Human action is also to be understood in another and more fundamental sense as the action whereby the self as such is constituted. Behind all its public acts of word and deed there are the self's own private purposes or projects, which are themselves matters of action or decision. Indeed, it is only because the self first acts to constitute itself, to respond to the world and to decide its own inner being, that it "acts" at all in the more ordinary meaning of the word. All its outer acts of word and deed are but ways of expressing and implementing the inner decisions whereby it constitutes itself as a self.

These decisions by which the human self acts to constitute its own inner being can always take one or the other of two basic forms—or, as we may also say, the self is always confronted with two basic possibilities of understanding itself in relation to the world. Either it can open itself to the world and make its decisions by sensitively responding to all the influences bearing upon it, or it may close itself against the world and make its decisions on the basis of an even more restricted sensitivity than is actually possible for it, fragmentary though it essentially is. In other words, the self can act either as a self who loves and thus participates as fully as it can in its own being and in the being of others, or it can act as a self who hates and thus is estranged both from the more intimate world of its own bodily life and the larger world of fellow selves and other creatures. In the first case, all its outer acts of word and deed will be in function of the inner act whereby it constitutes itself as a self who loves—just as in the second case, by contrast, all of the self's "acts" in the more ordinary sense of the word will but express or implement the primal act of a self who hates (cf. 176 f.).

What is properly meant by "inauthentic existence" is precisely a distorted self-understanding, and so a misunderstanding of the ultimate whole of reality as well as of oneself and all others as parts thereof. Although the inauthentic self may be said to be alive in the ordinary sense of "life," since it does subjectively participate in being to some degree or at some level, it cannot be said to be *truly* alive (or, as our American idiom has it, "really livin'"). Because it participates as fully as it can and ought neither in the whole of reality nor in any of its parts, including itself and its fellow selves, it does not enjoy the fullness of subjectivity that is actually possible for it and is literally not what it could and should be. Consequently, should it ever come to an authentic understanding of itself, wherein it does participate in being as fully as it can and should, the change is veritably a change from death to life. The self who was dead is now alive; and in its new authentic self-understanding, it is, as the New Testament expresses it, a "new creation" (2 Cor 5:17; Gal 6:15) (cf. 216).

"Death" does not refer simply to what is meant by the old saying, *mors certa, hora incerta,* that is, something out ahead of us, certain to happen at some uncertain hour in the future; it also refers to something taking place even now. As another old saying has it, *media in vita in morte sumus*—in the midst of life we are in death. Here and now in every present, we are each involved in that inevitable transience of all our moments of experience which Alfred North Whitehead speaks of as "perpetual perishing." No sooner has the present moment of our participation in being achieved its satisfaction than it slips away from us into the past, whence our poor powers of memory and appreciation are unable to recall it into living immediacy. Nothing happens but it directly falls subject to this ineluctable passing away. All our thoughts and feelings, loves and hates, joys and sorrows, projects and causes are relentlessly carried away from us into the past, where, as they more and more recede from our present, they

become all but indistinguishable from nothing. For all any of us can see, if we take into account only creatures as fragmentary as ourselves, destruction is on exactly the same level as creation, and it is the fate of everything that comes to be to become as though it had never been. "On us and all our race the slow, sure doom falls pitiless and dark" (cf. 223 f.).

But if what faith affirms to be true is true, the problem of death, including its more profound dimension of life's inevitable transience, has a solution. Our final destiny, as Christian faith understands it, is not merely to be loved by our human successors, but also, and infinitely more important, to be loved by the pure unbounded love of God, for whom we each make a difference exactly commensurate to what we are and of everlasting significance. Because God's love, radically unlike ours, is pure and unbounded, and because God, therefore, both can and does participate fully in the being of all God's creatures, the present moment for God never slips into the past as it does for us. Instead, every moment retains its vividness and intensity forever within God's completely perfect love and judgment. God knows all things for just what they are, and God continues to know and cherish them throughout the endless ages of the future in all the richness of their actual being. In other words, because God not only *affects*, but is also *affected* by, whatever exists, all things in every present are quite literally resurrected or restored in God's own everlasting life, from which they can nevermore be cast out (cf. 226).

Although we always already have some understanding both of the ultimate whole of reality revealed by our basic faith and of the natural and human world disclosed through our particular experiences, it is just as true that we do and must seek more understanding than we ever have. We learn only too soon that much that *appears* to be the case is not really the case at all and that the same is true of much that is *said* to be the case by our fellows in society. Unexpected experiences force revisions in our stock of empirical knowledge and skills, and the need to bring our basic norms to bear in novel situations, or the realization that the norms themselves are more or less problematic and in need of critical validation, drives us to seek yet a deeper, more adequate understanding even of them. Moreover, understanding is not only the *sine qua non* of the distinctively human way of living, but also the necessary condition of the distinctively human way of living abundantly. Consequently, since the art of life, as Whitehead says, is not only to live and to live well, but also to live better, the function of understanding in its service of the art of life is to seek by way of critical reflection more and ever better understanding than any we already have. And this remains true even if we recognize, as we surely must, that critical reflection even for its own sake is one of the constitutive elements in that more abundant life, the quest for which is the underlying motivation of our search for understanding.

It is in this eminently pragmatic context that all the forms of critical reflection—systematic and historical as well as practical—originate. Simply because of our nature and situation as human beings, we both can and must ask, What is really the case? in all the main ways constitutive of the various arts and sciences, natural and human, as well as of philosophy and history. And we have two controlling purposes in asking it: (1) to get answers to our question for the sake of the answers, for which we always have a more or less urgent need; and (2) to get answers to the question for the sake of asking the question itself ever more effectively—whether in order thereby to secure still more adequate answers than we would otherwise obtain or simply in order to realize as fully as possible our distinctively human capacity to understand, and thus also for critical reflection. This second purpose is further reinforced by the awareness that has become ever clearer in the course of human history that all our answers are really only ways of formulating our questions, anyhow. Because even the most critically reflective human understanding can never be more than fragmentary, the gap between our subjective understanding, however critical, and its object is never closed; and haunted by the clear sense that this is so, we are driven to persist in asking our questions. (cf. *On Theology*: 111 f.).